PART 2: The crisis timeline

When and how changemakers can use the six phases of a crisis to foster positive mindset changes amongst disaster communities.
Summary

Introduction

The six phases of the crisis timeline

**Phase 1**: Warning and Threat

**Phase 2**: Impact

**Phase 3**: Heroic

**Phase 4**: Honeymoon

**Phase 5**: Disillusionment

**Phase 6**: Recovery

What’s next?
As we continue to see an increase in the frequency and intensity of crises in the coming decade, most people will be impacted by a crisis or disaster to varying degrees in their lifetime. Meanwhile, changemakers such as activists, scientists, faith group leaders, legislators, educators and business leaders increasingly find themselves on the frontline of crisis response work. For example, environmental campaigners sourced medical supplies for indigenous communities in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst companies shifted their production from consumer goods to ventilators and facemasks. When responding to the consequences of these crises, many changemakers are often ill-prepared. Though traditional crisis responders such as disaster relief organisations may be better prepared for handling the crises themselves, their work is rarely focused on tackling underlying causes.

This text aims to spark a conversation between communities of changemakers pushed to the frontline and crisis response workers. We propose a model to help rethink not only how, but crucially, why changemakers engage in a crisis. Crises have long been identified as moments of huge disruption but, if we can learn how to empower impacted communities, they also offer unparalleled opportunities to drive much bigger, cultural and mindset shifts.

Image: Volunteers evacuate children affected by the floods in Sungai Raya Village, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. During the "Heroic" phase of a crisis people take risks to rescue and support others.

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Culture and collective mindsets

In the past, most changemakers focused on political, economic and physical system change, yet the collective belief system, or "mindsets", play an equally important role. Due to their disruptive nature, mindsets are far more likely to change during a crisis than in “normal” times. The way the crisis is experienced and communicated impacts how people will remember it, and influences how they perceive the world around them long after the crisis is over.

These collective crisis experiences can result in profound positive or negative cultural shifts and will shape the narratives, norms, identities and values people hold. Whilst they of course bring hardship, crises also provide changemakers with opportunities to shift cultures and create societal mindsets that are more aligned with some of the biggest challenges of the coming decade, such as climate change and mass biodiversity loss.

 [...] We can not only mitigate the risks of dangerous or destructive outcomes, but also shape a positive post-crisis culture.

If we can gain an understanding of how the mind works in a crisis, and how communities negotiate changes in narratives, norms, values and identities, we can not only mitigate the risks of dangerous or destructive outcomes, but also shape a positive post-crisis culture.

Crises have even been connected to the strengthening of civil society, either through the creation of institutions, like the forging of the labour movement following the Mexico City earthquake, for their impact on existing civil society, as was the case in Japan following the Fukushima nuclear accident, or generating a more generalised higher civic responsibility.
Structuring the crisis

According to disaster psychologists, there is a "model" for the way communities respond to disruptive events and crises such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, pandemics, financial disruptions or nuclear catastrophes.

Building on commonly used models from the emergency and relief sector, we propose a crisis timeline that also includes how crises shape, and can be shaped by, collective mindsets and cultures. While not a blueprint for all crises, such a model can help give us guidelines on how to act and what to expect. To find out more about the origins and evolution of the model you can read here.

We hope this model will help people working in crisis response to better understand and respond to the psychological and social states of affected communities during a crisis, and in doing so, can lead to positive, long-term cultural shifts.

Image: Residents queue to collect free food from a community pantry along a street in Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines. This initiative was set up to help the local community during the Covid-19 pandemic and is an example of how altruistic initiatives can flourish during the 'Honeymoon' phase. © Basilio H. Sepe / Greenpeace
The crisis timeline: how collective mindsets and cultures are shaped during the different phases of a crisis.

- Old mindsets
- New mindset

- Crisis phases:
  - A few days: Warning and Threat
  - A few weeks: Impact, Heroic, Honeymoon
  - A few months: Disillusionment
  - A few years: Recovery

- The narratives, identities, values, emotions, biases and social norms that characterize us before a crisis.

- Collective mindset negotiation
- Transition
- Reorientation
- Emergency experience
THE CRISIS TIMELINE

From disorientation to post-crisis culture

During a crisis, the impacted community goes through six so-called "psychological phases". These phases are shaped by individual and collective experiences, alongside the other messages that people are exposed to through communications channels.

PHASE 1

Warning and Threat

The first phase is characterised by fear and uncertainty: there are signs that a crisis is coming, but the magnitude and impact are unknown.

In this stage, different reactions and experiences depend on the kind of disaster: some crises have no warning, like a terror attack; others, like typhoons, might have days of warning allowing people to prepare themselves. Meanwhile, in a pandemic like Covid-19, while some people are taking actions to prevent infection, others elsewhere are fighting for their lives. Previous crisis experiences also strongly influence the reaction of the impacted community. For example, some communities that had experienced earlier epidemics like Sars and Mers, such as those in South Korea and Taiwan, used the time wisely, whilst others in Europe and the Americas ignored the real danger.

The inability to cope with uncertainty and fear can lead to denial, and in this period we often see signs of panic in some people. This can be characterised by a strong "me and my family first attitude", exemplified by hoarding, panic buying, bunkering down or fleeing. The looming crisis can also lead to disorientation – the ability of people to make sense of the situation and know
how to behave. People search for answers by watching how others act and so when the media focuses on extreme behaviour like panic buying, this can easily lead to more people doing the same.

The messages that affected groups are exposed to can also influence the narratives and norms of the crisis to come. In this phase, people build on the previously established social norms to find acceptable new rules for the emergency, such as how to communicate on social media or how to share and support each other (or not). These can be built on already established rules in the community, or on ones established during previous crises.

**PHASE 1**

**Recommendations**

The ‘Warning’ phase should be used to prime your audiences for altruistic behaviour. People need to be prepared for the potential suffering ahead but they also need to be reminded of their abilities to overcome crises together.

**Be transparent and informative**
Tell people what to expect and share information so communities can manage the crisis themselves and do not feel afraid.

**Showcase positive values like community and collaboration**
Establish the values and norms you want to see, and use examples that are relevant to your community.

**Perform and share acts of kindness**
Carry out or share actions like getting supplies for others or helping secure people’s houses. Provide tips and tricks to get through the crisis and support those who might be feeling anxious.

\[Priming\] is a phenomenon whereby exposure to one stimulus influences a response to a subsequent stimulus, without conscious guidance or intention.
Avoid amplifying antisocial behaviour

Don’t focus on behaviour like panic buying, even if just to criticise it.

Ask your audience

If you have more time, ask people how they think they might act in the crisis such i.e. with solidarity, by helping others or organising support.

Image: Inhabitants of Éfaté island, Vanuatu prepare their homes for tropical Cyclone Donna. © Pedro Armestre / Greenpeace
PHASE 2

**Impact**

Phase two is characterised by a range of intense emotional reactions - initial confusion and disbelief are typically followed by a focus on self-preservation and family protection.

In a typical disaster, the ‘Impact’ phase is short: an earthquake or a typhoon hits and then passes. This is also true for human-made disasters like industrial accidents or terror attacks. In longer-lasting crises such as a pandemic, the ‘Impact’ phase can not only be extended, but can also overlap with the other stages of a crisis. In a pandemic, the ‘Impact’ phase may be felt in the different infection waves, while in a drought the impact could be the moment of crop failure. In these longer crises, the impacts tend to be less synchronised, for example, people get sick or lose loved ones over a period of months. Nevertheless, communities and whole societies can also experience a shared ‘Impact’ phase, such as a health care system breakdown, or enforced emergency measures, like a lockdown.

PHASE 2

**Recommendations**

**Look after each other**

If you are part of the impacted community, this is the time to protect yourself and each other.

**Keep communications lines open**

If you are not directly part of the impacted community, try to keep in touch with those hit by the crisis to allow for a quick assessment of the damage and to see how you can help.
PHASE 3

**Heroic**

During the "Heroic" phase, survivors take risks to rescue and support others and we see the emergence of a new collective social identity moulded by a shared experience of the disaster.

The 'Heroic' phase usually only lasts a few days. Long before emergency forces can reach a disaster area, *neighbours become essential first responders*, providing physical and emotional support. They rescue people from rooftops or collapsed buildings, administer first aid or provide shelter and food for those who have lost everything. In the 'Heroic' phase, the perception that "we are in this together" emerges. This *new identity* creates mutual willingness, expectations and norms within the 'disaster community' to help and care for each other. These communities are naturally inclusive - everybody who has suffered from the crisis can form part of it. This new shared identity boosts altruism throughout the impacted community whilst other emotional drivers, such as the desire to regain agency, also motivate people to take more actions to support or rescue others. As these actions are often driven by emotions instead of rational thought, they can lead to people taking unnecessary risks, and be limited in their effectiveness. For example, people may help each other in an epidemic without having the necessary protection gear, or they may limit more strategic responses, as was seen in community organised *oxygen drive-bys during the Covid-19* pandemic in India, which limited the ability to prioritise oxygen access to the most vulnerable.

In this phase, people are still making sense of the new situation and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. As old norms and narratives are rendered unfit for the present, new norms rapidly emerge. Communities start to make sense of the situation by building on the collective experience and identities are formed in the early hours of the crisis.
PHASE 3

Recommendations

The ‘Heroic’ phase is one of intense emotions, like fear, courage, grief and gratitude. People are looking for orientation from other community members, and values and norms are rapidly emerging from the community’s new shared ‘disaster identity’. This is the time to ensure the development of the right norms and narratives.

Lead by example
Act within the norms and values you want to see. Help others whenever you can, but also provide space for others to help you. Build agency for others to help themselves and allow for moments of pride.

Share stories of altruistic action and community support
When done well, these can help build pride and confidence within the community. They can also inspire and support the spread of altruism, even motivating people to take similar actions in future crises or in non-crisis times. Create moments to connect, reflect, and recover.

Offer physical & emotional support
Both of these are in high demand during this time.

Empathise and feel
Try to be aware of your own feelings and empathise with the feelings of impacted people, even if they differ from your own.
PHASE 4

Honeymoon

In the "Honeymoon" phase, community cohesion is at its highest. Altruistic action shifts from risk-taking to caring as prosocial behaviour becomes the norm.

The “Honeymoon” stage usually lasts a few weeks and this is the time when helping the impacted community becomes a common purpose. This help can come from the community itself, from rescuers, or even from bystanders who have not been impacted. Within the impacted communities their social identity as a “disaster community” is now strong, reinforced by the sharing of resources, time, stories and experiences. This builds new forms of cooperation and inclusiveness, leading to the emergence of new norms and narratives. Selfish behaviour still prevails in some individuals but it tends to be seen as going against the norm. If still operational, social media is filled with content documenting these shared experiences, often with a high degree of creativity, humour and empathy, as was seen in the diverse "lockdown videos" during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The community of crisis survivors experiences a feeling of inclusivity that they had never felt in "normal" times. They become part of an empathetic, inclusive and equal society that they didn’t imagine was possible. This can even lead to their memories of the crisis being filled with joy and positivity despite the loss or chaos they experienced.

During this time of high social support and creativity, altruistic initiatives flourish. For instance, during the first Covid-19 wave in Europe people came out to applaud frontline health workers, and during the ‘Honeymoon’ phase in India's first wave there were multiple initiatives to support migrant workers. Meanwhile, neighbourhood pantries were set up in the Philippines to help the local community during the pandemic.

The large amounts of attention on the impacted community can also increase the amount of support flowing in from the outside, restoring hope for a fast recovery. It is also a phase when we witness a very strong “abundance mindset” with people believing there are enough resources to share with the community. Meanwhile, participation in local actions provides the feeling of
agency and, as a consequence, of regaining control over the crisis itself. During the ‘Honeymoon’ phase, initiatives can be created that continue throughout the following stages of the crisis, even if the public and media are no longer paying attention.

However, the surge in altruism and community inclusiveness is often wrongly interpreted as a communal shift in values. It is, in fact, the creation of a temporary ‘disaster identity’, which is also supported by a shift from people thinking about future wellbeing to just getting through one day at a time.

As the impacts of the crisis on day-to-day life diminish, so the importance of the community’s “disaster identity” fades, for example, when the floods recede or the state of emergency ends. In this period, old identities from "normal" times, such as professional, racial or political identities, regain importance. When people experience inequality in the impacted community this temporary identity can fade even quicker, for example, if elites have privileged access to resources, or some people lose their jobs while others don’t. The "Honeymoon" phase relies strongly upon a sense of “generalised reciprocity”\(^2\), and so when the community feels this has been violated, their belief in this new "inclusive" society falters.

While it is not common, if social division appears early on in the crisis and a new inclusive social identity cannot be created, communities may skip the ‘Honeymoon’ phase altogether, moving directly to the ‘Disillusionment’ phase. The extent and strength of the ‘Honeymoon’ phase strongly depends on the social capital of the community or the rescue and support teams. If rescue operations are poor, if impacted communities are considered a threat to public control or communities are already strongly polarised and unequal, survival mindsets can kick in.

As quickly as the ‘Honeymoon’ phase appears, it will fade and in just a few weeks can give way to the ‘Disillusionment’ phase.

\(^2\) Generalised reciprocity is the notion that, if one helps another person, this person is not only more likely to help oneself in return but also more likely to help some other person in need. Thus, by helping others, one contributes to creating a world in which people in general will be helpful to oneself as well as to important people in one's life.
PHASE 4

Recommendations

The ‘Honeymoon’ phase offers multiple opportunities for experiences and stories about inclusion, equity, solidarity, agency and compassion. These experiences happen in times of reorientation and are powerful moments to trigger a long-term, positive mindset change or for communities to imagine a different future. To maximise this impact changemakers should:

- Keep communities together
  Where possible, impacted communities should stay together, in or close to their homes. This allows for the emergence of a ‘disaster community identity’. If possible, evacuation should be avoided.

- Hand over the wheel
  Communities should be supported to help themselves, taking the responsibility for recovery. They should not be alienated by being portrayed as victims or even villains.

- Communicate positive new values
  Use dynamic and normative messaging to share emerging new values like solidarity, altruism or inclusiveness.

- Create rituals and symbols
  These help to increase the community’s visibility, pride and connection with its new identity.

- Avoid amplifying antisocial behaviour
  Even if you are criticising this behaviour it can feed the frame that it is happening, creating what is known as normative ambivalence.

- Ensure longevity
  Communal initiatives and support structures will emerge spontaneously but try to support them to last through the ‘Disillusionment’ phase.
Image: A group of filipino farmers from the islands of Cebu, Bohol and Negros donate seeds to 125 of the most affected farmers by typhoon Hagupit in Dolores.

© Charlie Saceda / Greenpeace
PHASE 5

Disillusionment

When optimism turns into discouragement and the inclusive disaster community breaks down.

During this phase, which usually lasts for months, people often perceive the crisis or its aftermath as uncontrollable, losing their sense of agency. Fear, depression, anxiety, anger and frustration increase and people switch from an "abundance mindset" to a "scarcity mindset". This notion of scarcity can be triggered by a decrease in access to resources, limited freedom, social contact, or just dwindling personal energy due to the enduring stress of the crisis.

While the "Honeymoon" phase sees an increase in compassion, in the "Disillusionment" phase it tends to decrease as people revert back to traditional identities and smaller ingroups like family and friends. People also start to look for others to blame for their prolonged suffering, and we see an increase in fragmentation and polarisation. By now, people begin to get tired of reading about the crisis and so the media coverage decreases. Meanwhile on social media, while some move from sharing experiences to sharing conspiracy theories, others start to turn their attention away from the crisis in search of distraction.

People's perspective moves from the present to the future, creating room for planning and expectations, but also for failure and disappointment. The long lockdowns witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic are a good example of the grinding pressure of the 'Disillusionment' phase and how it can lead to a significant increase in mental health problems. Meanwhile, after natural disasters, disillusionment sets in when people realise that rebuilding their community will take much longer than they initially thought, as was the case in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake.

A scarcity mindset is the belief that there will never be enough, resulting in feelings of fear, stress, and anxiety.
This phase can also be prolonged by what are known as triggering events or aftershocks. For example, when the testing of a contaminated site after a nuclear or chemical accident shows that evacuated communities will not be able to return to their homes, or news about new variants of a virus, or delays in vaccination during a pandemic.

Some aftershocks can be so great that they take the whole community back to the ‘Impact’ phase and through phases two to five again. This could be a repetition of the first initial disaster such as a second seismic shock after an earthquake, or an unexpectedly strong infection wave in an epidemic. Aftershocks can also include other disruptions related to the initial disaster, like an economic crisis or social unrest.

While this phase is influenced by external factors, it is largely determined by the perceptions and attitudes of the impacted community, comparable to the stages of grief one needs to go through before reaching acceptance. When acceptance is reached, people can move on to the ‘Recovery’ phase.

**PHASE 5**

**Recommendations**

During this phase, changemakers should focus first on preserving the progress made in the ‘Honeymoon’ phase: the memories, narratives, norms that could lead to a positive mindset shift. They should also try to get the community to the ‘Recovery’ phase as quickly as possible. Though we cannot prolong the ‘Honeymoon’ phase, with the right interventions we can influence how deep communities fall in this phase.

**Prepare people**

Make communities aware, even during the ‘Honeymoon’ phase, that disillusionment will come. Help people realise they are in this for the long haul, that there are struggles ahead and attention from media, politicians and others will fade.
Encourage conversations
Conversations are crucial to make people feel that they are being heard but also to create alignment between the different views and interpretations of the situation that can arise.

Avoid division
Avoid patronising, a lack of transparency or highlighting injustices that could divide the community.

Maintain confidence & pride
The more communities have developed these values, the more likely they will continue to rely on each other and take responsibility for the future.

Offer help
Some members of the community will start to suffer from depression, PTSD or other trauma-related consequences. Organising help for them, without creating stigma is important.

Image: Ms Sato, an evacuee from Kawamata, Japan who had to leave her farmhouse after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Eight months later she was still living with her children in temporary housing and was still unsure when, if ever, she would be able to go home.
© Robert Knoth / Greenpeace
PHASE 6

Recovery

This phase is characterised by a feeling of moving on: individuals and communities begin to assume responsibility for rebuilding their lives, and people adjust to a “new normal”.

The “Recovery” stage can take years, with all of the emotions, perceptions, narratives and norms that were built up and negotiated during the crisis (see the Disrupted Mind: Scientific Insights) shaping the years that follow.

Even though on the surface life might resemble that of pre-disaster times, the crisis will have resulted in significant shifts in the mindsets of the survivors. In the US, the 2008 financial crisis not only created a whole new "wandering tribe" of seasonal workers, but also fostered the anti-elite mindset that paved the way for Donald Trump eight years later. In the Covid-19 crisis, some countries may have entered the ‘Recovery’ phase through vaccination, while others continue to experience significant aftershocks, or are still struggling to contain the first ones. This leads to a strong disparity in the stages of disaster between rich and poor nations, locking the latter in the ‘Disillusionment’ phase.

PHASE 6

Recommendations

This is the time to consolidate your efforts and to carry over the mindset changes you have created into normal life.

Create discussion spaces

Create spaces for your community to talk about what they want to keep from the experience and what they want to lose from pre-crisis times.
Help maintain habits
Identify concrete things people can do to keep their new habits: what rituals can the community create, what rules do they want to establish, or how do they remind themselves of their shared experiences.

Celebrate gratitude
Not only for having sustained through the crisis but for the experiences and growth people achieved during this time.

Identify new challenges
These are challenges that could give the community further meaning as they solve them together.

Share inspiration
Communicate to help inspire other communities, don’t forget to create a case study to share with your community and others.

Image: Residents begin to clean up and rebuild their homes in Namhak village, Thailand following tropical storm Pabuk. © Chanklang Kanthong / Greenpeace
What’s next?

The Crisis Timeline is the second paper of the three-part series The Disrupted Mind, exploring how the human mind works during a crisis and what we can learn from this to drive change. In Part 1: Scientific Insights we illustrated the processes through which disruptive crises can catalyse societal mindset change from a more scientific perspective. The Mindworks Lab is currently developing Part 3: The Handbook which is built on the model described above and will include more detailed recommendations on how to intervene in the different phases of a crisis. We are also working on further resources such as audio content and toolkits.

We would love to receive ideas and have conversations with experts, communities and changemakers working on these issues to further improve these insights. The model we have proposed is completely open-source and we would be very happy to see it be built upon and improved.

In late 2021 Mindworks will organise a series of conversations on this work and we are also looking for people who would be interested in sharing their experiences with us. You can get in touch and share your ideas, experiences or thoughts at hello@mindworkslab.org and sign up to our newsletter here.